

## **ELEMENT 131: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR**

### **01 INTRODUCTION**

The State Planning Council adopted this plan as element 131 of the State Guide Plan on September 13, 1990. The plan was prepared by the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, which was created by Congress in 1986.

The purpose of establishing the corridor was to preserve and interpret the contributions to the national heritage of the historic, cultural, and natural resources of the Blackstone River Valley. Unlike a national park, the corridor designation is intended to bring together the efforts of many agencies, organizations, and citizens to preserve nationally significant cultural and natural assets where people actually live and work.

The corridor is significant for the following reasons:

- it was the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution;
- it represents the first widespread industrial use of water power in the United States;
- it was where the Rhode Island System of manufacturing was developed;
- it was the first ethnically and religiously diverse area of New England; and
- its industrial and transportation systems were crucial to the development of the second and third largest cities in New England.

The corridor (see Figure 131 (01)) extends 46 miles from Worcester, Massachusetts, to Providence, Rhode Island, encompassing 20 communities. In Rhode Island, these are Woonsocket, North Smithfield, Cumberland, Lincoln, Central Falls, Pawtucket, East Providence, and Providence.

### **02 ISSUES ADDRESSED**

The plan addresses many assets of the Blackstone River Valley that contribute to its "sense of place."

#### **Historic resources**

The most important of these are historic farms and hilltop villages, mill villages (mills, housing), individual buildings (commercial Main Streets, civic structures), and transportation facilities (roads, the Blackstone Canal, railroads).

Many of these structures are threatened by deterioration or inappropriate renovation. Yet the historic fabric of the valley is remarkably intact and includes some excellent restorations. There are opportunities for further rehabilitation, interpretation, and adaptive reuse of historic properties.

FIGURE 131(01) BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR

## **Cultural resources**

The Corridor's early industrial history is tied to the "Rhode Island System of Manufacturing," in which small mill villages were established by private investors, using family labor.

The larger urban areas saw the development of ethnic neighborhoods: English, Irish, French Canadian, German, Swedish, other British, Dutch, Mediterranean and southern European, Slavic and eastern European, African American, Portuguese, Southeast Asian, and Latin American. The valley also has a Native American population

There is potential for more programs to interpret the valley's cultural resources; for example, through exhibits, festivals, and school activities.

## **Natural resources**

Besides the river and tributaries, these include wetlands, forests, fields, rock outcroppings, wildlife habitat, scenic viewpoints, and rural landscapes. They are threatened by water pollution, littering and dumping, quarrying, and "creeping suburbanization."

## **Recreation resources**

The corridor abounds in opportunities for many forms of recreation, focusing on the river and canal. Both states and their cities and towns are working to develop parks, trails, bikeways, other sites, and improved public access. These efforts need to continue.

## **Regional identity**

The corridor's settlement pattern and character are threatened by rapid, uncoordinated growth and inattention to resource protection. It is important to preserve the following land use types that give the area its identity: the river and canal corridor, agricultural/open land, mill villages, mill complexes, town centers, cities, and gateways to cities and towns.

## **Economic resources**

The Valley's history has been shaped by "Work," but the closing of mills led to unemployment and economic decline. Residents now have a choice about what kind of economic future they want. The potential exists to tie economic opportunity to preservation, using historic buildings for new industrial development.

## **Tourism resources**

It is important that tourism be developed as a system of attractions and events that appeal to diverse audiences (families, recreation seekers, tour groups, etc.). Tourism needs more focus and more funding. It should build on existing interpretive programs and recreational activities.

### **03 GOALS**

The National Heritage Corridor Commission adopted the following goals:

- to PROTECT the Valley's historic, cultural, and natural resources in an integrated manner;
- to EDUCATE and INTERPRET the Corridor's importance to the people of the Valley and its visitors;
- to FOSTER specific activities that tap the Valley's unique resources and invite people to enjoy and celebrate them;
- to ENCOURAGE public and private investment in the Valley's physical and human resources that reinforce these values;
- to STIMULATE the research necessary to understand the Valley's role in the American Industrial Revolution and the lessons it holds for our times; and
- to COORDINATE and ENCOURAGE all the partnerships that will be necessary to achieve these goals.

### **04 STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS**

The plan is to be implemented through:

- partnerships (among federal, state, and local governments, businesses, cultural and civic groups, and individuals--with the Commission acting as a catalyst),
- a clear agenda (strategies and actions), - annual work plans, and - evaluation
- The following strategies and actions are set forth.

#### **A. Historic Preservation**

1. Continue to inventory historical and archaeological resources, as a first step in safeguarding them.
2. Preserve key historic districts, properties, and sites that define the character of the Blackstone River Valley.
  - Identify properties that are threatened by development pressures, deterioration, or inadequate resources.
  - Develop strategies for the protection, restoration, and/or enhancement of these and other sites.
  - Provide direct financial and/or professional assistance as incentives to protect key properties and sites, in accordance with Commission criteria and priorities, and following the Commission's strategy of cooperative agreements and contingent commitments.

- Work directly with the owners of such properties, and provide information and assistance to them in applying for preservation and other grants to assure their protection.
  - Other strategies include: historic easements, adaptive re-use, program assistance, matching grants, marketing strategy, evaluation of interpretive program, assistance in training guides, assessment of management alternatives, and acquisition of development rights.
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3. Provide professional planning assistance to Corridor towns and cities.
    - Work with local governments and State Historic Preservation Offices to gain listing on the National and State Registers of Historic Places for all sites, properties, and districts that meet the criteria.
    - Assist local governments to establish historic districts in area of concentrated numbers of historic buildings and to adopt historic district zoning and other protective by-laws for those areas determined to be of primary importance to the National Heritage Corridor's integrity.
    - Work with towns to implement the State Historic Preservation Offices' design guidelines for historic districts and provide guidelines/preservation planning for areas outside historic districts.
    - Create and/or target incentive programs (low-or no-interest revolving loan funds, grants, etc.) for sensitive and compatible building rehabilitation.
    - Establish historic preservation priorities in each Corridor community.
  4. Provide information to the public about available professional assistance, grants, and guidelines for historic preservation, restoration, and maintenance.

## **B. Interpretation**

1. Seek the development of museums/information centers in Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Uxbridge, and Worcester.
2. Design and develop permanent, traveling, and wayside interpretive exhibits.
3. Sponsor ongoing historical research and publication.
4. Develop a sign program for the Corridor.
5. Design, produce, and distribute interpretive materials--such as maps, guidebooks, and brochures--that describe the historic, cultural, natural, and recreation resources of the Corridor.
6. Co-sponsor community interpretive-related programs and activities.
7. Develop a consistent, Corridor-wide interpretation program.

8. Train volunteer interpreters.
9. Establish a central repository of Valley historical documentation, such as maps, studies, photographs, papers, and oral histories.
10. Develop a school program to communicate the history and significance of the Blackstone Valley.
11. Encourage local initiatives consistent with Corridor goals.
12. Encourage the establishment of festivals for the celebration of art and culture in the Corridor.

### **C. Environmental Conservation**

1. Improve the water quality of the Blackstone River.
  - Support consideration of the need to monitor and control water level and dam safety in the Blackstone River as the level affects water quality, canal operation, and flood control.
  - Build public support for water quality improvement.
  - Support state efforts to enforce existing pollution controls, evaluate their effectiveness, and develop additional controls where needed; to reduce both point and nonpoint sources of pollution; to clean up toxic waste sites; and to eliminate litter and dumping along the river and canal.
  - Insure prevention of filling of wetlands adjacent to the river or its tributaries.
  - Encourage maintenance of vegetated buffer zones along the river and its tributaries.
  - Support the local watershed groups such as Blackstone River Watershed Association, Save the Bay, and other watchdogs for the river, in their attention to sources of pollution, clean-ups, and river recreation activities.

Investigate the possibility of nominating the Blackstone River as a „scenic river" in the State Scenic Rivers Program.

Re-establish a balanced sports fishery with consideration given to anadromous fish. Encourage a study to determine the feasibility of anadromous fishery enhancement.

2. Identify natural sites that are threatened, in need of action or assistance, and/or important to the completion or enhancement of state heritage parks.  
Develop a natural resource inventory.  
Seek "Areas of Critical Concern" designation for environmentally degraded or sensitive areas, which receive priority treatment by state government agencies in research, resource protection, and review of development proposals.

Protect through land purchase critical properties to maintain the integrity of state/local parks, such as Wolf Hill in the Rice City area of the MA state park.

3. Protect open space within the Corridor.

Establish a protected Greenway along the river and canal, with adequate setbacks and viewshed protection. Utilize appropriate protection tools, such as: conservation easements and rights-of-way; remainders following life estates; leases; voluntary agreements; acquisition of more park land; limited development; tax incentives; fee simple purchase; and regulatory powers such as floodplain zoning, riparian set-back, site plan review, and subdivision open space dedication.

Endorse individual applications for matching and other funds from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Massachusetts Self-Help Program, the Rhode Island Local Open Space and Recreation Grants Program, and other sources.

Preserve special natural areas, such the Blackstone Gorge (High Rocks), the Valley Falls Marsh in Lincoln and Cumberland, and Capron Pond in Uxbridge. Strategies for preserving Blackstone Gorge include serious consideration of the Gorge as the first bi-state park of the Corridor.

Designate Milville's Triad Bridge area, and the Capron Pond and portions of Blanchard Quarry in Uxbridge, as areas for special protection in Massachusetts.

Support the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, which identifies the Blackstone River corridor as an important flyway for migratory waterfowl and calls for the establishment of 5,000 acres of protected wetland habitat along the Blackstone River.

4. Support state, local, private, and individual efforts to enhance the environment. Sponsor special environmental events.

Continue to support clean-up efforts by Forests and Parks and staff volunteers in state Heritage Parks.

Establish or strengthen existing Conservation Commissions to protect and promote natural resources.

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Blackstone Corridor

Restore disturbed or degraded sites, such as landfills, gravel pits, and abandoned lots. Establish a tree-planting program within the river corridor.

Support efforts to enhance wildlife habitat.

Co-sponsor citizen initiative and recognition projects that mobilize and coordinate community involvement in Corridor activities.

Establish an annual Environmental Award to be given to an individual, organization, or community that has made an exemplary contribution to the protection and/or enhancement of the Corridor's natural environment.

D. Land Use Management

1. Integrate the Corridor Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan into existing state and regional planning.

2. Provide information to the public about good land use practices.

Distribute the Corridor's Land Use Management report, which contains policies and recommendations for each landscape type and land use issue in the Valley.

Provide professional planning assistance to Corridor communities to develop consistent regional protection mechanisms and to develop solutions to local land use issues and problems, such as local historic district zoning, strip commercial development, signage, river and canal bank preservation, and farmland preservation.

Encourage local use of existing planning services from the Rhode Island Division of Planning and Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission.

Establish a Valley-wide coalition of planners, including zoning and planning boards, to develop general consensus on land use goals and to improve transition zones along community borders. Encourage the Blackstone Selectmen's Association and consider the expansion of the concept to Rhode Island.

Sponsor workshops with other Valley communities to share information regarding successful incentive programs for residential/commercial rehabilitation, design review, small business development, public space enhancement, beautification programs, etc.

Sponsor workshops with local builders and developers regarding appropriate site planning, design and landscaping for residential, commercial, and industrial developments.

Hold forums for discussion, presentation, and/or mediation in controversial land use/management issues.

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#### Blackstone Corridor

Recognize developers, builders, civic leaders, local governments, and landowners whose planning and development practices have advanced the goals of protecting and improving the Corridor's integrity.

Develop a videotape presentation about the land use and development pressures that threaten the Corridor's integrity.

Develop a speaker program.

3. Identify and inventory Corridor resources and conditions.

-- Identify and inventory land that is suitable for development, land

ownership along the Greenway, and environmentally sensitive areas; and make information available on a map for public use.

4. Enhance the character of the Valley.

Promote downtown and neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Promote the establishment of public access to and along the river and

canal where feasible and appropriate. Bring the river into the life of the cities. Establish a Corridor-wide Greenway (see Environmental Conservation, above).

#### E. Recreation Development

1. Complete or enhance state and local parks and forests within the Corridor. Identify and preserve key parcels that deserve inclusion in park and forest systems and that are suitable for recreation development.

Seek an appropriate means to protect the outstanding natural beauty of the Blackstone Gorge, assuring continual water flow through it, while making it more accessible through the sensitive development of facilities for canoeing, kayaking, hiking, and picnicking.

Determine incorporation strategies (acquisition, easements, etc.) for each; implement construction, maintenance, and landscaping projects that provide greater public use and access, especially along the river/canal/towpath sections; and advocate an appropriate level of state action.

Form alliances with land conservation trusts, Valley businesses, landowners, local governments, regional foundations and groups such as the Blackstone River Watershed Association, the Trust for Public Land, and The Nature Conservancy to insure that key open space properties are protected.

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#### Blackstone Corridor

Create a Greenway, linking together to the extent possible all river and canal banks (see Environmental Conservation, above).



Assist state/local governments in obtaining resources to carry out acquisition and development plans.

Provide planning assistance to Corridor communities to develop local parks and to focus efforts along the river, canal, and towpath.

Work with local governments to develop a list of suitable sites for recreation development, focusing on the river's edge, canal, and towpath.

2. Implement construction, maintenance, and landscaping projects that provide greater public use and access to the river.

Develop a bikeway from Providence to Worcester, utilizing the Rhode Island section now under development, but adding to it an extension to Worcester via railroad rights-of-ways and other linkages.

Develop Corridor-wide pedestrian recreation trails. Develop the towpath into a usable hiking trail.

Locate and establish a system of portages along the river.

Identify sites and develop picnic facilities along the riverbanks.

Locate, design, and work with private landowners and the states to place access signs, trail markers, and warning signs in the river/canal corridor.

Design wayside exhibits for publicly owned riverfront land. 3. Produce recreation publications.

4. Endorse special events and activities that are consistent and/or compatible with Corridor goals.

#### F. Economic Development and Tourism

1. Develop an economic development strategy for the Valley.

Assemble a working group of Commission members, members of the business community, economic and tourism specialists, environmentalists, state and local officials, and residents to develop consensus and strategy consistent with Corridor purposes and goals.

Encourage the coordination of historic preservation and affordable housing programs.

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#### Blackstone Corridor

Promote real estate marketing within the Corridor which reinforces--and does not degrade--the character of the Blackstone River Valley.

Create a clearinghouse for potential assistance programs that might revitalize the cultural and economic health of the region.

Encourage local governments to include economic development and tourism strategies for the Valley in local comprehensive plans.

2. Enhance town and urban centers.

Work with the Corridor's business and industrial leaders to adapt historic mill buildings for modern industrial, commercial, retail, cultural and residential uses.

Develop Corridor-wide signage controls similar to Vermont's.

Provide assistance to communities in the Valley to take advantage of state programs designed to revitalize town centers, such as the Main Street program, the Massachusetts Small Cities Program, parking garage programs, and the leasing of state facilities.

3. Develop an inventory of sites suitable for investment consistent with the land use goals of the Corridor.

Evaluate present zoning for compatibility with Corridor goals.

Where railroad access is important, seek locations or rehabilitation projects that allow appropriate development without harming the character of the town centers or river environment.

4. Maintain current manufacturing activity.

-- Help local manufacturers to become aware of and participate in state programs that are designed to keep mature industries in business and improve their competitiveness.

5. Participate in a targeted development program to attract the next generation of industries.

-- Expand the Valley's manufacturing base by creating a targeted development program to attract new, compatible industries that have a strong future and are environmentally compatible--industries that enhance (and do not degrade) the environment, provide good jobs, are properly sited, and that locate in historic buildings when possible.

B. Develop a transportation strategy.

-- Develop a Corridor-wide transportation strategy, which:  
addresses the need for different levels of transportation routes while  
preserving the region's identity',

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#### Blackstone Corridor

- advocates sensitively sited and landscaped development along Route 146, involving limited-access industrial park and commercial developments;
- evaluates and mitigates region-wide traffic impacts from developments such as the Route 146 project and the development of a Route 146/Massachusetts Turnpike interchange on the Corridor;
- evaluates, updates, and, if appropriate, implements the proposed Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission's coordinated bi-state transportation study;
- identifies the railroad as an element of the transportation infrastructure;

- preserves town and village centers; i.e., avoids widening Main Streets or destroying town commons to accommodate more traffic;
- preserves historic and small, narrow country roads that contribute to Corridor character;
- considers and assesses alternative routing to allow through traffic to avoid congested historic centers, historic/country roads, and significant resources;
- provides enjoyable and easy access to the Corridor's resources for locals and tourists; and
- includes the development of a bikeway from Providence to Worcester (see Recreation Development, above).

7. Develop a tourism strategy and support tourism development that enhances Corridor values. Implement historic preservation, interpretation, and land use management goals to enable tourists to enjoy and learn from the Valley resources and enhance the Valley's viability as a destination for tourists.

Consult with tourism and business groups in the development and implementation of a consistent signage program.

Encourage and enhance the programs of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and other tourism-related businesses and organizations to organize themselves as one unified entity in advertising, promotional materials, and events.

Encourage the rehabilitation and construction of appropriately designed public and private facilities--such as inns, museums and information centers, and rest stops--where necessary to support tourism.

Adopt a consistent Corridor image and marketing communications package.

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